



Engagement & Disillusionment in High School Chorus

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Research Question

What might engagement, or lack of engagement, look like in a vibrant choral program at one New York City high school?

Both voices of students who are engaged and those who are disillusioned are presented here.

Rationale

- Scarcity of urban perspective in music education research (Frierson–Campbell, 2006, Fitzpatrick 2011)
- Relatively few studies explore the student voice (Hoffman, 2008)
- Very little study of New York City: one of the largest and most diverse school systems in the country, and the site of dramatic “education reform.”
- Difficult for researchers to hear voices of disaffected secondary music students.

Method

Data for this case study comes from interviews with four young women. This data is drawn from a larger ethnographic study of this high school music program carried out by the researcher. Fieldwork took place in 2015-2016.

Findings & Implications

Common themes in all four interviews included:

- Perceived quality of the relationship with the teacher-conductor.
- Perceived focus and commitment of other students.
- Perception of rigor.
- Perception of value added.

Dominant themes in single interviews included:

- Failure to find the “way in” for new repertoire, or to choose culturally relevant repertoire.
- Sense of lack of support from classmates.

These findings have much in common with other findings (i. e. Adderley, Kennedy, and Berz, 2003; Rohwer and Rohwer, 2009; Parker, 2010; Sweet, 2010), though all of these studies found considerable social benefits—a factor notable here for its absence. The focus on perceptions of other students’ focus and commitment is a new factor.

Relationship—Rigor—Value Added

“It doesn’t seem like you are special in this program. Like you’re learning to manifest your abilities. It’s like sit, sing, and leave.”

Relationship

“I mean, honestly, when I walk into this school, I’m not in the best mood. But once I walk into the music hall I just like – my mood gets uplifted. I don’t even like need to hear music, just being in the music hall, it makes me feel better....I always come here because all the teachers really have a great spirit. And they understand . . .”

“She gets mad over small things. And it gets me mad, because I don’t like the way she goes about it. I don’t like when you start attacking me. Then I have to defend myself. I don’t like it when she comes off like that. I don’t like it when you give me work and then immediately start yelling”

“ I just feel like they go too easy on us....they really have to push us just a little bit more. Not just with how strict they are, but they have to just give us more work and give us more to learn about and don’t make it too easy for us. You know?”

Rigor and Value Added

“Sitting in class for an hour every day, you have to be quiet. And, sometimes, kids don’t have the patience for that. It has to be something you really enjoy. Like, other classes, you have to be there and you have to engage at some point. But this class is, like, be silent and listen to them learn their parts over and over and over again. And it’s repetitive and very slow, especially with the kids that are in our class.”

Rigor and Value Added

FM: So, what have you learned in beginning chorus this year?

CT: Don’t talk back to the teacher.

FM: Ok. What else?

CT: How to project my voice without straining my vocal cords.

FM: That is a big thing.

CT: I learn how to sing from my diaphragm, which made my voice better.

FM: Ok. That’s good. What do you wished you learned?

CT: How to read music.